

The Importance of Teacher Stories

Teachers have so much guilt.

Almost every teacher I've ever spoken to feels guilty for one thing or another—they aren't putting in enough time, they aren't grading fast enough, they aren't as available as they could be for their students. And we've all heard the stories of "that amazing teacher" that single-handedly closes the achievement gap, motivates their students, engenders high quality learning. These are the "superhero teachers" that fill inspirational news stories, books, and movies. These stories, combined with our personal experiences in school, end up shaping what the public knows and understands about teaching, for better or worse. As a teacher, I inevitably compare myself to these stories, and I wonder—why can't I do that? Why don't my students have amazing conversations and produce wonderful projects?

But then I talk to some of these supposed "superhero teachers," and I realize that yes, they are doing awesome and amazing things in their classroom, but also these are *stories* that are being told. And often, only one aspect of the story is being told because when we hear a story, we want a nice arc to the story, a nice resolution. The idea of the solo "superhero teachers" who can fix all of the educational problems we have in the United States is nice, but it's mostly a fantasy. In reality, teachers work with each other, with their students, with the other staff at their schools. But who's telling *these* stories?

This summer, I had the pleasure of reading ***Mission High*** by Kristina Rizga, and the opportunity to talk with the three teachers that were profiled in the book. And these three teachers reminded us that the book provided snapshots and stories, and that every day is not amazing. These teachers are doing the hard work every day; they are building relationships with their students, working with colleagues to develop better lessons, and working with the other staff in their schools to fully support their students. But it's not easy and it's not pretty. There are students that are recalcitrant, lessons that flop, tensions with colleagues, support staff that are overwhelmed, just like in any classroom. Yet it's this messy work that results in the awe-inspiring outcomes that get written about. Often, the stories that are told miss both the messiness in those amazing classrooms and the awesomeness in "ordinary" classrooms. When we only hear about the amazing outcomes from select classrooms, our society has incomplete knowledge about

teaching. If our goal is to really improve education for all students, we need to understand teaching and learning as fully as possible.

To get a real view of what's going on in the classroom, we should look to teachers. We are the ones who know what's really going on in our classrooms, daily. We are the ones who can accurately portray the nuances of our classrooms, the nuances that often get missed or glossed over in the news stories. We are the ones who can document how well certain curricular materials worked (or didn't work) in our classrooms (this year—maybe next year will be different, because the students will be different, because I will be different). We are the ones who can describe how we have (or haven't) brought the hard realities of life into our classrooms for our students to process. And when we are honest about our stories, we can help to alleviate each other's guilt, because it becomes so obvious that we are all in this together. It becomes so obvious that although your context is different from mine, your successes and your struggles are both things that I can relate to. And most likely, my successes and struggles are things that you can relate to. Teacher stories are a complex body of knowledge about both the content that we teach and the people involved, and we can learn so much from each other when we're honest about the triumphs and challenges. And maybe, if we are honest about our stories (both the good and the bad), we can help those outside of teaching see the multifaceted nature of our profession and see how there is no single “magic bullet” that will solve all of the educational problems in America.

Teachers *are* telling their stories, every day. Teacher blogs abound online, and are a wonderful resource for curriculum, classroom structures, and other aspects of teaching. Teachers are also all over Twitter, and **#teach180** provides a quick and easy way to share about what's going on in the classroom. Many KSTF Fellows, including myself, joined the #teach180 movement last year (documented by several Fellows in ***Kaleidoscope***—the KSTF journal). It's not easy to put yourself, your classroom, your teaching out on public display. **It's something I struggled with last year when participating in #teach180.** But if we as teachers don't share our stories, who will?

It's important to remember that as a teacher, I can't possibly do it all on my own. Honest teacher stories are the ones that have helped me incredibly in my first years teaching, whether they were in a blog, on Twitter, in an op-ed column, or in

informal conversations with other teachers. These are the stories that helped me make sense of my experiences as a new teacher in the context of teaching as a whole. These are the stories that guided me toward curricula that (hopefully!) helped my students, that provided insights in how to navigate difficult situations and conversations in the classroom. Honest teacher stories are what have helped me move from guilt to change rather than from guilt to giving up in my own classroom. Teacher stories are how I gained knowledge about teaching that I couldn't yet gather from my individual classroom, and this is the knowledge about teaching that has had the most profound effect on my own teaching practice. My hope is that, with more teachers telling their stories, those who don't teach will realize how much teaching is a collective effort, and maybe even change educational policies to reflect the nuances of teaching. And I hope that those of us who do teach will continue to listen to other teachers' stories, so that we can together reflect upon our practice and improve education as a whole.

*Each week, beginning on September 12, members of the KSTF community will be **writing about one of the characteristic actions of teachers acting as primary agents of educational improvement**. This week, we're writing about teachers acting as primary agents of educational improvement when they generate and share knowledge in ways that support educational improvement in classrooms, schools, districts and beyond.*